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## Jackson Purchase Feuds

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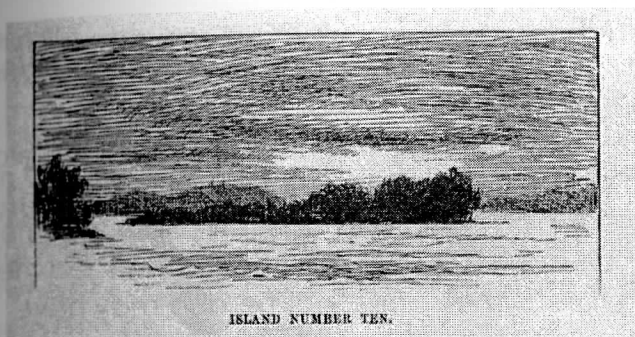
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Twain, Mark, Life on the Mississippi, Boston, James R. Osgood and Company, 1883

## Jackson Purchase Feuds

By: Richard D. Parker

The words "Kentucky" and "family feuds" seem to consistently run together in American history. Kentucky soil hosted the most famous family feud in United States history, the Hatfield-McCoy feud, which occurred on the West Virginia-Kentucky border. Beyond Kentucky's borders, the Jackson Purchase area has had two famous feuds to make nationwide news. The first of these feuds occurred on the Kentucky/Tennessee border in the counties of Fulton, Kentucky and Obion County, Tennessee, between the Darnell and the Lane families. The Darnell-Lane feud inspired Mark Twain to include it in his book Life on the Mississippi and historical speculation indicates that it may have been the inspiration for the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons feud in his famous novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The second and lesser-known feud occurred between the Shelby, Jenkins, and Taylor families in Ballard County, Kentucky.

The Darnell-Lane feud is complex history to write. Even Mark Twain, the most famous writer of the Mississippi River, got one of the names of the families involved wrong. The newspapers of the era confirm that the Darnells were involved in the feud, but the other party involved was the Lanes, not the Watsons. Of course, Twain may have changed the name to protect the Lanes, but he also may have simply been told the name in error. The Watson family does make an appearance in July 1883, but according to the *Daily Cairo Bulletin*, they were the cousins of the Darnells, not the other family who feuded with the infamous Darnells. It is interesting to note that Life on the Mississippi was published in early 1883, nearly six months before the account in the *Daily Cairo Bulletin*, at which time the Watsons and Darnells were on good terms. Besides the name error, however, Twain got most of the facts correct in his recollection of the feud, and was able to paint an accurate picture of the infamous violence that occurred in the Jackson Purchase.<sup>1</sup>

"There's been more than one feud around here, in old times, but I reckon the worst one was between the Darnells and the Watsons. Nobody don't know now what the first quarrel was about, it 's so long ago; the Darnells and the Watsons don't know, if there's any of them living, which I don't think there is. Some says it was about a horse or a cow--anyway, it was a little matter; the money in it wasn't of no consequence--none in the world--both families was rich. The thing could have been fixed up, easy enough; but no, that wouldn't do. Rough words had been passed; and so, nothing but blood could fix it up

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<sup>1</sup> *Alton Evening Telegraph*, January 29, 1883; *The Daily Cairo Bulletin*, July 27, 1883

after that. That horse or cow, whichever it was, cost sixty years of killing and crippling!"<sup>2</sup>

According to James M. Brice, a news editor in Obion County, Tennessee, "The Lanes and the Darnells were not ignorant, rough people. On the contrary, they were polished, educated people and the owners of enormously fertile plantations in the northern part of Lake County." Up until the beginning of the feud, it seems that both sides were living in harmony with one another. This was easily done, seeing as Captain Robert B. Lane had married a niece of General Henry M. Darnell, Sr. But this harmony quickly eroded when a disagreement between the Lanes and the Darnells erupted about the verbal harassment of a man employed on Gen. Darnell's farm. The employee suffered insults from the Lanes, even after Gen. Darnell instructed them to stop. The Lanes did not heed Gen. Darnell's words, and he decided to teach them a lesson. That lesson commenced a few days later when Capt. Lane and one of Gen. Darnell's sons got into an argument. This disagreement resulted in Gen. Darnell's son shooting Capt. Lane, who was seriously wounded in the fight. After the argument, both sides kept their guns close and waited for the other one to make a move. Finally, the Lanes had enough and decided the best thing for them to do was to leave town until things cooled down.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi, Boston, James R. Osgood and Company, 1883, P. 286

<sup>3</sup> Hickman Courier, March 20, 1869; Brice, James, "I Had A Real Good Time,: The Making of A Country Editor, P. 186

On March 17, 1869, two months after the first shooting, the steam boat, *The Belle of Memphis*, landed at Stuart's Landing on the Mississippi River in present-day Fulton County, Kentucky. Henry M. Darnell, Jr., Richard (Dick) M. Darnell, and Matthew Darnell boarded the steamer with their rifles and instructed the captain of the steamboat to land at Island No. 10 to pick up another party. That other party included Capt. Lane, his wife, their two children, his brother Clinton A. Lane, and another family member, Mr. C. P. Edwards. The Lanes were waiting to ride the steamer to Memphis, Tennessee to temporarily escape the feud. Unbeknownst to the Lanes, the Darnells were waiting on board the steamer with their rifles and shotguns, having been tipped off that the Lanes were planning on skipping town. As Capt. Lane walked up the ramp to the steamer along with his wife and their two children, Dick Darnell raised his doubled barrel shotgun and pulled the trigger, unloading both barrels of the gun. The first shot entered Capt. Lane's chest and the second shot hit him in the head, mortally wounding him. The Darnells then opened fire on Clinton Lane and Edwards, who were still standing on the shore. Clinton Lane was killed instantly, but Edwards was only injured and managed to fire several shots of his own at the Darnells. Edwards's injuries eventually caused him to fall to the ground, where a Darnell walked to the shore and shot him at point blank range. The Darnells walked off *The Belle of Memphis*, telling the captain as they left, "Take good care of the lady and children as they were nice people."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Evening Argus*, March 19, 1869; *The Wheeling Daily*

After the initial shootings, the Darnells fled *The Belle of Memphis* and the crew carried a dying Capt. Lane ashore, where he was surrounded by his family for the last time. After the murders, an angry mob of approximately one hundred men from Obion and Dyer counties in Tennessee formed, determined to hang the Darnells for their crimes. The mob forced the Darnells to flee their homes. Sometime later, the three returned to their homes in present-day Fulton County, Kentucky and defied all attempts by the law to be captured. In May of 1869, the citizens of Tiptonville, Tennessee, sent an account of the murders to the governor of Tennessee, Dewitt Clinton Senter, who issued a \$250 reward for the capture of the Darnells.<sup>5</sup>

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*Intelligencer*, March 19, 1869; *Hickman Courier*, March 20, 1869; *The New York Times*, March 24, 1869; *The Nashville Union and American*, May 25, 1869  
<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*, March 24, 1869; *The Cairo Evening Bulletin*, April 09, 1869; *The Nashville Union and American*, May 25, 1869; *The Memphis Appeal*, May 27, 1869;

## GOVERNOR'S PROCLAMATION.

**EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT. NASH-**  
ville, Tennessee, August 21, 1871. Whereas, On the 24th of May, 1869, a proclamation offering a reward of \$250 for the apprehension and delivery of Richard M. Darnell, Matthew Darnell, H. M. Darnell, Sr., and Henry M. Darnell, Jr., charged with the murder of Clinton A. Lane, Robert B. Lane and C. P. Edwards, late of the county of Obion; and whereas, it has been made known to me that said reward is not necessary to a proper administration of law, and that justice can be had without the same:

Now, therefore, I, D. W. C. SENTER, Governor of the State of Tennessee, do hereby set aside and revoke said proclamation.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto subscribed my official signature, and ordered the Great Seal of the State to be affixed thereto. Done at the Department in the city of Nashville, this 21st day of August, 1871.

D. W. C. SENTER.

By the Governor:

T. H. BUTLER, Secretary of State.  
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*The Tennessean*, August 24, 1871

Four months after the shooting of the Lanes, Gen. Darnell, tired of running, turned himself over to the authorities in Tiptonville, Tennessee. He was charged with accessory to murder, but claimed he did not fire a shot. He said he was present at the time of the murders on *The Belle of Memphis*, but did not participate, even though he was armed. Gen. Darnell was released on a \$10,000 bail. Gen. Darnell's trial occurred two years later in August of 1871, where he was acquitted of any wrong doings.

The other Darnells had yet to be captured, and still held the \$250 reward on their heads in 1871.<sup>6</sup>

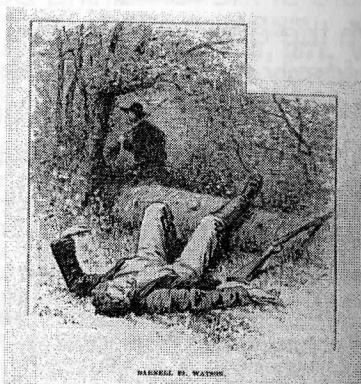
The capture of the remaining Darnells never took place. With the acquittal of Gen. Darnell, it seems that the family decided to lay low. They do not resurface in the historical record until 1871, when, you guessed it, yet another feud broke out. After the Darnell-Lane Affair, the Darnells opened a ferry service carrying passengers from Kentucky/Tennessee to Point Pleasant on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River. The Darnells operated their ferry service beside another ferry service owned by Robert (Albert) Nall. Nall had leased the rights from Gen. Darnell, who by this time had a landing named after him called Darnell's Landing. One day, after a large number of passengers boarded Nall's ferry, one of Gen. Darnell's employees offered a lower fare for the passengers if they would ride Gen. Darnell's ferry instead. A fight broke out between Gen. Darnell's employees and Nall. Upon hearing the argument, Gen. Darnell came to the landing from his house and, being the short-tempered man he was, remarked to his employees, "Why don't you kill the damn son of a b----h?" After arguing with Gen. Darnell for a few minutes, Nall drew his pistol and shot the General. One of Gen. Darnell's employees by the name of Cole drew his pistol and shot Nall, who then fell to the ground and returned fire, instantly killing Cole. Another one of Gen. Darnell's

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<sup>6</sup> The Cairo Evening Bulletin, September 30, 1869; The Tennessean, August, 24 1871; The Tennessean; August 29, 1871;



employees by the name of Coe then drew his pistol and fired another shot, finally killing Nall.<sup>7</sup>



Twain, Mark, Life on the Mississippi, Boston, James R. Osgood and Company, 1883

Gen. Darnell survived the fight, but was finally arrested for the murder of Nall in 1877. Gen. Darnell turned himself in, but, convinced of his own imminent mortality, did not want protection from the local Sheriff, nor to be lodged at the jail while he waited for his trial. Instead, he wanted his own armed men to protect him. This did not sit well with the Attorney General of West Tennessee, who, during Gen. Darnell's trial, insisted that Darnell be placed under proper arrest and not safeguarded by his own men. When the Attorney General finished presenting his affidavit, the judge ordered the sheriff to arrest Gen. Darnell. The sheriff, who was intimidated by Gen. Darnell and his men, would not arrest him and exited the courtroom. Gen. Darnell

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<sup>7</sup> Nashville and Union American, August 20, 1874; Hickman Courier, August 21, 1874; The Milan Exchange, September 03, 1874;

announced to the court that there was not enough men in the county to put him in jail. Gen. Darnell left the courtroom with his men and fled back to Kentucky. The judge then telegraphed Governor James D. Porter of Tennessee to send a posse of Chickasaw Guards to help capture Gen. Darnell.<sup>8</sup>

After traveling back to Kentucky, Gen. Darnell escaped to Missouri. Despite his frequent travel, however, he was eventually arrested in 1879 and taken back to Tennessee for another trail. The arrest was made by Jas Warner, the City Marshal of Hickman, Kentucky, who also claimed a reward of \$350 that the State of Tennessee had placed for the capture of Gen. Darnell. By the time of his second arrest, Gen. Darnell was seventy years old and was reportedly quite decrepit. Gen. Darnell could not stand trial because of his health, and eventually died in 1880 from complications originating from the gunshot wounds inflicted during the shootout with Robert Nall. Despite his infamy, it is interesting to note that the *Public Ledger* in Memphis, Tennessee wrote, "The deceased was a man of great force of character, was well known in all the river counties and stood high in the esteem of his neighbors. He was a man of violent temper, however, which sometimes got him into serious difficulties."<sup>9</sup>

As for the rest of the Darnells, Henry Darnell found himself in another feud with a man named William (Wm) J. Shearer in 1878. This feud also resulted in a shootout, but this time a Darnell was the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Tennessean*, August 11, 1877

<sup>9</sup> *The Hickman Courier*, August 08, 1879; *Public Ledger*, February 24, 1880; *The Cincinnati Daily Star*, February 26, 1880;

victim of the shooting. Henry M Darnell, Gen. Darnell's son, who was also one of the shooters on the *Belle of Memphis*, was shot and killed in a feud in Lake County, Tennessee. Henry was a member of the Missouri Legislature and was very well-known in Missouri. The trouble started when Darnell, who leased a property to Shearer, insulted Shearer's wife about the money owed on the property. Shearer, thinking this was in bad taste, decided he was going to get Darnell back and plotted his murder.<sup>10</sup>

Shearer crossed into Tennessee from Missouri and sent a note a few days later requesting Darnell come and see him. He claimed he was on his death bed and needed to rectify the mortgage on the property. Darnell, not sensing any trouble, paid a man to row him across the Mississippi River to the house where Shearer was staying. The boat landed close to the house, which was located on the river's bank, and as Darnell got out of the boat he was hit with a buckshot, fired from the window of the house. Shearer then appeared from the house and walked to the dying Darnell. Darnell managed to raise his derringer pistol but was too weak to fire it at Shearer. Darnell replied to Shearer, "If you want to kill me, give me a white man's chance for my life." Shearer then raised his gun and fired a shot that hit Darnell on the crown of head, passing through his head and exiting out of his chin. Shearer fled the scene of the crime, but was captured by a posse two days later. Shearer was shot during his capture and admitted to

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<sup>10</sup> *The Hickman Courier*, August 24, 1877; *The Hickman Courier*, August 31, 1877; *The Tennessean*, May 01, 1878; *The Hickman Courier*, May 03, 1878;

the murder of Darnell. He soon thereafter died from his injuries.<sup>11</sup>

As for General Darnell's other son, Richard (Dick) Darnell, he makes a reappearance in July 1883. Dick Darnell and three cousins of his, by the last name of Watson, beat Wm. McClutchey, the first mate of the *City of Vicksburg* steamboat, nearly to death. The dispute occurred after Darnell claimed to have been overcharged for a horse that was sent to him aboard the *City of Vicksburg*. Initially, it seemed as though Darnell and McClutchey were able to work out their differences. But two days later when the steamboat returned, Darnell and his cousin captured McClutchey and beat him. After the assault, Darnell was seized by four men who nearly beat him to death for the assault of McClutchey. In August, after recovering, McClutchey resumed his duties upon the *City of Vicksburg*.<sup>12</sup>

The famous Shelby-Jenkins-Taylor Feud started around 1886, when Evan and Mort Shelby murdered a woman by the name of Mrs. Sallie Moore. The Shelbys were taken to jail in Wickliffe, Kentucky, but Evan never made it to see the inside of his cell. He was lynched and killed while being transported. After the lynching of Evan, Mort was moved to Paducah, Kentucky for safekeeping. Mort was originally sentenced to life in prison, but an appeal court ruled that Mort did not play a significant rôle and he was acquitted. The Taylor and the Jenkins

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<sup>11</sup> *The Hickman Courier*, May 03, 1878

<sup>12</sup> *Public Ledger*, July 26, 1883; *The Daily Cairo Bulletin*, July 27, 1883; *Public Ledger*, August 11, 1883

families, who lived nearby, felt Mort deserved payback for his deed. They banded together to fight the Shelbys. Over the next ten years, numerous fights broke out between the three families. None of these fights, however, were as bloody as the violence that occurred from November 1896 to December 1897.<sup>13</sup>

In November 1896, the first round of violence commenced when Mort Shelby and his son Alfred beat John Taylor and his son Thomas to death. It seems that the dispute broke out over a few of Taylor's hogs that got loose and ate Shelby's corn. Shelby responded by sicking his dog on Taylor's hogs. Taylor then demanded that Mort Shelby fix his fence. In response, the Shelbys fired their guns at the Taylors, eventually escalating into attacking the Taylors with the butts of their guns and pistol whipping them until they were both dead. After the bloody affair, the Shelbys disappeared briefly. They eventually turned themselves in to the authorities in Paducah. In August of 1897, the court subpoenaed the Shelbys to appear before the court, but they made arrangements to postpone the trial. It is unclear as to the reason why, but the court did grant their request.<sup>14</sup>

In December 1897, the feud reignited, adding another victim to the Shelbys' growing list of casualties. The fight made *The New York Times*, thus introducing the world to the famous Jackson

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<sup>13</sup> *The Cairo Citizen*, November 19, 1896; *New York Times*, December 16, 1897; *The Cairo Citizen*; December 23, 1897

<sup>14</sup> *The Cairo Citizen*, November 19 1896; *The Paducah Evening Sun*, August 10, 1897

Purchase feud. The trouble this time started when Mort and Alfred were looking for a lost horse on Beaver Dam slough on the Gas Creek. They crossed paths with George Shelby, who was accompanied by two brothers by the last name of Walton. Jenkins immediately shot at the Shelbys from his wagon. The Shelbys then ducked behind some trees and returned fire. Alf Shelby pulled out his Winchester rifle and shot Jenkins in the chest. As a result, both sides were arrested. After the evidence was examined, though, it was ruled that the Shelbys acted in self-defense and were released. After their release, it appears that the Shelbys must have quieted down their ways as they do not appear again in the historical record.<sup>15</sup>

Both the Darnell-Lane Feud and the Shelby-Jenkins-Taylor Feud show the lawlessness of the Jackson Purchase area and how families were quick to settle their differences with a gun instead of bringing in the authorities. The remoteness of the area and the close proximity to other states, providing a quick getaway within a few hours, most likely aided the longevity of these feuds. The great irony is that, in both feuds, neither guilty party was ever punished by the authorities. They either fled from the area, or pleaded (and were granted) that they acted in self-defense. Even though the memory of both Jackson Purchase feuds has been blurred through the years, they do offer an important look into the mindsets of the people in the area: it's better to kill than be killed.

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<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, December 16, 1897; *The Cairo Citizen*; December 23, 1897; *The Cairo Citizen*; December 30, 1897;

### **About the Author:**

Richard Parker grew up in Paris, Tennessee and graduated from Murray State University in 2009 with an ungraduated major in History. In his spare time, he enjoys playing guitar and the clawhammer banjo. He and his wife Emily reside in Paducah, Kentucky, where he works for the U.S. Forest Service. His first book entitled The Wild and Wonderful World of the Jackson Purchase, a complete history of the Jackson Purchase region, will be released in fall of 2016.